



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
May 22, 2018

Dear Interested Citizens:

Thank you for your thoughtful reviews and comments on a proposal by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to acquire fee title to approximately 276 acres from Randy Koch, as an addition to FWP's 35,041-acre Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (FCWMA), located south of Tarkio in Mineral County. FWP's purpose for purchasing the land is to manage the important habitat (including 1.2 miles of riparian and fisheries habitat along Fish Creek) for deer, elk and other wildlife, and to prevent this habitat from potentially being developed or subdivided. Public access and recreational opportunities would be increased by managing the property as part of FCWMA.

Enclosed is a decision document in which FWP explains its rationale for recommending that the Fish & Wildlife Commission and the State Board of Land Commissioners approve this transaction as proposed. Upon completion of the public involvement process and by including information in this Decision Notice, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final. The decision document also summarizes public comments on the proposed acquisition and explains how FWP considered and incorporated these comments in formulating a recommendation.

FWP will request approval for the purchase of the subject lands at the monthly Fish & Wildlife Commission meeting scheduled for June 14, 2018, in Helena. FWP will also request approval from the State Board of Land Commissioners, tentatively at its regularly scheduled meeting on June 18 in Helena. These meetings are open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission and Land Board meetings.

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randy Arnold', written in a cursive style.

Randy Arnold
Regional Supervisor

RA/sr

DECISION NOTICE

FWP Proposed Purchase of a 276-Acre Addition to the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area

May 2018

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to acquire an approximately 276-acre addition to its Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (FCWMA, located in Mineral County, SE of Superior), through a purchase from private landowner Randy Koch. The proposed acquisition property (“subject property”) is composed of two private inholdings (parcels) within the 35,041-acre FCWMA, which is bordered by lands owned by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) and United States Forest Service (USFS). The 2 parcels are the approximately 116-acre Whitehorse parcel (just west of Whitehorse Gulch, off West Fork Fish Creek) and the 160-acre Main-Stem Fish Creek (main-stem) parcel.

This project represents a unique opportunity for FWP to conserve 2 private inholdings totaling 276 acres of vital wildlife and fish habitat in Fish Creek and to consolidate FWP ownership and management of the FCWMA. The property fills in a crucial gap in public ownership that connects wildlife movement across a broader landscape and protects key habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. The Fish Creek drainage is a Tier 1 Terrestrial Focal Area in Montana’s *Statewide Wildlife Action Plan* (SWAP; MFWP 2015¹) for wildlife connectivity and a high-priority linkage zone for carnivores (grizzly bear, Canada lynx, wolverine, etc.) between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, the Ninemile Divide and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. The Whitehorse parcel provides an important migratory corridor for elk and mule deer from the WMA to the higher elevation summer range in the proposed Great Burn Wilderness. The main-stem parcel is critical for north-south movement through the riparian habitat along Fish Creek; abundant white-tailed deer and moose, as well as mountain lion, black bear, gray wolf, mountain grouse, numerous migratory and resident birds, and amphibians are commonly found in this inholding.

Fish Creek is also a Tier 1 Aquatic Regional Focal Area, the most hydrologically intact tributary watershed in Mineral County, and the most valuable stronghold for westslope cutthroat trout and federally protected bull trout (both Montana Species of Concern, SOC²) in the middle Clark Fork region. This stream system supports the largest fluvial bull trout population in the middle Clark Fork River drainage and typically contains more redds than the rest of the tributaries in this region combined. The main-stem property includes a key migratory corridor and subadult-rearing area for migratory trout, as well as a high-value public fishery that currently supports > 4,000 angler-days annually.

The main-stem Fish Creek parcel proposed for acquisition contains approximately 78 acres of riparian habitat and more than 6,000 feet of the Fish Creek channel. Acquiring this inholding property would

¹ Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP). 2015. Montana’s State Wildlife Action Plan. Helena MT.

<<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/conservationInAction/>> Accessed 21 May 2018.

² A native animal breeding in Montana that is considered to be “at risk” due to declining population trends, threats to its habitats, and/or restricted distribution. The purpose of Montana’s SOC listing is to highlight species in decline and encourage conservation efforts to reverse population declines and prevent the need for future listing as Threatened or Endangered Species under the Federal Endangered Species Act. More information may be found at <http://mtnhp.org/animal/>.

eliminate the risk of development that could compromise the ecological integrity of lower Fish Creek and this part of the WMA. Public ownership would also ensure additional access for public hunting, fishing and other opportunities along a popular recreational corridor.

FWP's acquisition of the Fish Creek WMA and State Park, winter road plowing on the nearby Fish Creek Road, and access to thousands of acres of adjacent public lands and the proposed Great Burn Wilderness make the subject property marketable for potential development and/or subdivision, which could directly impact conservation values on the WMA. A nearby property with similar attributes sold in 2013, on which a residential home/cabin and other developments have already been constructed. FWP made a large investment in the conservation of Fish Creek with the purchase of the WMA and State Park in 2010. Therefore, it is of high priority to the agency to protect this investment by acquiring inholdings that otherwise could be developed and affect FWP's ability to effectively manage the larger landscape for fish and wildlife values.

The potential replacement of native vegetation with houses, garages, barns, fences, driveways, and/or other construction would constitute a direct habitat loss for native wildlife populations on the subject property and would affect the integrity of managing the WMA as a whole. Human activity associated with residential areas, including pets and vehicle traffic, would displace many species from otherwise suitable habitat within an expanded radius beyond the house and development footprint. Conversely, the potential introduction of garbage, bird feeders, fruit trees and other non-native plants and foods would be expected to attract deer, bears and mountain lions into nuisance situations that would not occur without rural residential development; these situations are difficult and expensive to mitigate or correct. Additionally, potential and unencumbered private sale and/or development of the subject property would likely decrease future (public) hunting opportunities on those lands.

Acquisition of this property would be consistent with the goals of the Montana's SWAP (MFWP 2015) to conserve two community types of greatest conservation need: riparian/wetlands (a terrestrial community type) and mountain streams (an aquatic community type). Management of the property would be under the guidance of the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park Interim Preliminary Management Plan (MFWP 2009³).

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

FWP's objective for purchasing the land is to manage important habitat for deer, elk and other wildlife, and prevent this habitat from potentially being developed or subdivided. The primary benefits of acquiring this property would be to:

1. Protect an important forest and riparian corridor that provides vital habitat for wintering elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose;
2. protect a high-priority wildlife linkage zone;
3. protect some of the last and best remaining habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout in the middle Clark Fork region by securing 1.2 miles of riparian habitat along Fish Creek;

³ The Interim Management Plan can be found in the Draft EA (Appendix B) for the Fish Creek WMA and State Park acquisition on FWP's webpage at http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/acquisitionsTradesAndLeases/pn_0081.html The Decision Notice (DN) is at http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/decisionNotices/pn_0423.html and the revised DN is at http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/decisionNotices/pn_0427.html All accessed 21 May 2018.

4. increase public access and recreational opportunities by managing the property as part of the FCWMA; and
5. maintain integrity of the WMA by preventing uses of these inholdings that would be incompatible with the WMA's habitat and recreation values.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A, No Action. Under the No Action alternative, FWP would not purchase the property from Randy Koch. The property would likely remain as private ownership into the future and could be developed or subdivided into numerous private parcels, based on its location and natural resource values and the history of sales of other inholdings along Fish Creek and its main tributaries since 2010. FWP's acquisition of the Fish Creek WMA and State Park, winter road plowing on the nearby Fish Creek Road, and access to thousands of acres of public lands and the proposed Great Burn Wilderness make the property very marketable. A nearby property with similar attributes sold in 2013, on which a residential home/cabin and other developments have been constructed.

Land management activities on similar inholdings within the WMA indicate that private ownership carries increased risk of further development or subdivision, riparian and channel encroachment, illegal water withdrawal, and general habitat degradation, as well as loss of public access. The subject property is in Mineral County and is not zoned.

Alternative B, Proposed Action. Under the Proposed Action alternative, FWP would purchase the 160-acre main-stem and 116-acre Whitehorse properties from Randy Koch as an addition to the FCWMA. Appraised value of the property is \$900,000. The properties are currently inholdings within the 35,041-acre FCWMA. If approved, the property would be added to and managed in concert with the WMA for the protection of important habitat for SOC, such as bull trout, and numerous game and nongame fish and wildlife species. Additionally, the proposed acquisition would also protect additional wetland and riparian areas that support important wildlife travel corridors. The addition of this inholding to the WMA allows FWP to protect its larger conservation investment in Fish Creek by keeping these parcels from being developed.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment ("Draft Environmental Assessment, Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, Proposed Acquisition of Koch Inholdings") for public review of this proposal on March 14, 2018 and accepted public comment for 30 days until April 13, 2018.

Legal notices of the proposed addition and its Draft-EA availability were published twice each in the following newspapers (dates): *Independent Record* (Helena; March 13, 20), *Mineral Independent* (Plains; March 14, 21), and *Missoulian* (March 13, 20). A statewide news release was issued March 19.

FWP mailed 30 copies, and emailed approximately 39 notifications, of the Draft EA to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and non-FWP agencies. The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Public Notices") beginning March 14 through April 13, 2018.

A public hearing to explain the project, answer questions and take public comment was held in Alberton on March 22 (6:30 p.m.) at the Alberton Community Center.

Written Comments

FWP received 71 written or emailed comments (Appendix A):

- 58 from individuals (two of these comments each represented 2 people);
- 1 from a lumber production company: Idaho Forest Group;
- 1 from an agency: Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation; and
- 11 from organizations: Five Valleys Audubon, Five Valleys Land Trust, Great Burn Study Group, Hellgate Hunters & Anglers, Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Montana Trout Unlimited, Montana Wildlife Federation, Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup, Shining Mountain Chapter of Montana Wilderness Association, Trout Unlimited, and WestSlope Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

Comments were from the following Montana towns and locations: 25 from Missoula; 7 from Alberton; 4 from Stevensville; 3 each from Superior, Bozeman, and Helena; 2 each from Trout Creek and Whitefish; and one each from Belgrade, Emigrant, Ennis, Gallatin Gateway, Glendive, Huson, Jefferson City, Lewistown, St. Regis, and Victor. Four comments were from out-of-state and 8 did not indicate a location. (Alternatively, 37 came from Region 2 FWP within 35 miles of FCWMA, 5 from further areas of Region 2 FWP, 17 from other FWP regions, 4 out-of-state, and 8 unknowns.)

There was extensive support for the proposed acquisition:

- 64 (90%) commenters (including individuals, the business, and all the organizations) supported the acquisition;
- 2 (3%) commenters (individuals) opposed the acquisition; and
- 5 (7%) commenters did not clearly indicate support or opposition.

Public Hearing Comments

Twenty-five members of the public attended the public hearing, and 12 provided public comments: 11 individuals and 1 organization (Hellgate Hunters & Anglers) (Appendix B). Nine (individuals and the organization) supported the proposed acquisition, 1 (individual) opposed the acquisition, and 1 was neutral.

The hearing provided a worthwhile and constructive forum for discussion during the question-and-answer (Q&A) portion of the meeting. (Attendees were reminded that comments they made during the Q&A portion were not counted in the official tally, and that there would be opportunity to make official comments during the public testimony portion of the hearing.)

Many recognized the property as having high value for wildlife, fish, and recreation. There was much interest in protecting this stretch of creek as a migratory corridor for native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. There were concerns about putting more land into public ownership in a county already largely dominated by public land. Alternatively, it was suggested that keeping the watershed healthy and open to the public will bring people in and be an economic opportunity to the county over the long-term.

Summary of All Comments

Including the written comments received and the public hearing⁴, FWP received a total 82 public comments, with 73 supporting and 3 opposing the proposal, and 6 not (clearly) stating support or opposition. Support represented 71 individuals (including 9 anonymous), in addition to 1 lumber production company and 11 organizations; opposition was from 3 individuals (1 anonymous).

Comments in support of FWP acquiring the Koch inholdings and integrating those lands into Fish Creek WMA included (in no particular order):

- Keeping the land from being developed or subdivided; keeping it in a more natural state
- Enhancing or protecting fish and wildlife populations and values, including habitat, riparian health, wildlife corridors, water quality
- Bringing the property in public ownership and use
- Personal and/or family traditions and memories associated with long-time recreational access to the Fish Creek area--going back to when most of the land was privately owned by Plum Creek Timber Company (or earlier), and was available for public recreation.
- Scenic and natural beauty
- General outdoor recreation and public access for hunting and fishing, as well as other forms of recreation such as hiking, camping, trail use
- Economic benefits to the surrounding community (FWP tax payments, tourism)
- Wise investment now; passing it on to future generations

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

Below is a summary of representative *public comments, questions and suggestions* and FWP responses. For ease of response, similar comments from different individuals may be grouped together if they expressed a similar view, and some comments are shortened or paraphrased. (Numbers in parentheses below correspond to the numbering of the individual commenters: those preceded by A are from Appendix A, and B are from Appendix B.)

Comment: *The ownership of the NW1/4 Sec 34, T14N-R25 (adjacent to and SE of the Whitehorse parcel) is shown on the [Figure 1] map in the EA as being state trust land. This particular parcel was exchanged to the National Forest in December of 2010 in the Lolo Land Exchange (A-1).*

FWP Response: Thank you for this correction. Yes, the NW4 of Section 34 in Figure 1 is incorrectly shown as “State of Montana” [Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, DNRC] land, when in fact it is US Forest Service land. (The ownership of this NW4 section is correctly labeled in Figure 3.)

⁴ One organization speaking at the public hearing also submitted written comments; hence it was only counted once towards the total of 82. There could be some overlap between the 71 written and remaining 11 hearing commenters because: 5 of the hearing speakers did not identify themselves by name, 5 of the meeting attendees had submitted written comments, and 9 anonymous written commenters might or might not also be duplicating a named written commenter and/or hearing speaker.

Comment: *Is this expanded real estate a part of the Fish Creek State Park (A-3a).*

FWP Response: No; FWP's Fish Creek State Park (SP) is located along the north-central boundary of Fish Creek WMA, as depicted in Figure 1 in the EA. The WMA and SP currently are under the same Management Plan from FWP's original Fish Creek area acquisitions in 2010.

Comment: *I also request FWP do the following to support access for the public:*

1. *Provide vehicle parking areas for fishers and hikers.*
2. *Provide public access to the Whitehorse track. That means no closed gates except during hunting season.*
3. *Provide public access to existing logging roads in the Whitehorse track for motorized and non motorized use (ATV, bikes, snowmobiles, hike, & horseback).*
4. *Provide public access to existing logging roads in the Fish Creek State Park. That means no closed gates. Open gates at Mile 7 of road 341 and roads off of Williams pass junction, and roads off 341 south of the pass.*
5. *Provide public access to existing logging roads to connect Williams pass and the Whitehorse track.*

The overall intent is to provide public access to greatest number of Montanans and other visitors who are not able to hike 10 to 20 miles of mountains. (A-3b)

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments. We will consider how to improve parking along the main Fish Creek road adjacent to the Main Stem parcel.

These parcels will be managed under the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park Interim Management Plan (see Footnote 3). Open and closed roads on the rest of the WMA and State Park, including a gated road on the WMA in the Whitehorse drainage, are outside the scope of this EA and Decision Notice. Travel plan on the WMA would be revisited during the development of a final management plan for Fish Creek WMA, along with opportunity for public input.

Comment: *I'm in favor of FWP acquisition of the Koch property, subject to: . . . the Draft EA says the "forests on these parcels would be managed to support forest health . . . (EA, pg 14). Those words usually imply logging, which I would prefer not take place. (Nature has done a pretty good job over the millennia of keeping forests "healthy") (A-9.3).*

FWP Response: Natural disturbances, such as fire and beetles, will continue to play a role in shaping the forests on the WMA over the long term. Any forest management actions proposed by FWP on the WMA such as prescribed fire, thinning, or commercial logging would be evaluated on the relative benefits to wildlife, as per the main purpose/goals of a Wildlife Management Area. Any proposed project would go through a public review process and have public comment opportunity.

Comment: *The cabin on the property should be removed ASAP (A-9.4).*

FWP Response: FWP's short-term plans are to leave the cabin on the property. The cabin, because of its structure and location, would be very difficult to move. Therefore, the other option would be to dismantle it. We will evaluate its benefit for administrative use and weigh this

against maintenance costs. If we are unable to find the cabin useful and it becomes difficult to maintain, then we will consider dismantling it at that time.

***Comment:** Sounds like a good thing, but you should ask the 454 people that where for the limited permit area for mule deer in HD 103 just in case seeing they are the majority of the Montana peopke, or maybe purchase it and make all animals in that area limited permit because making limited permit areas apparently give hunting opportunities not take opportunities away. FWP is curupt so it doesn't matter at the end. The letters that where submitted wanting names and email addresses could of been faked, check this email out (A-10).*

FWP Response: This is beyond the scope of this proposed action. Mule deer buck harvest is currently managed with limited permits in HD 202. Decisions made in regards hunting seasons occur within FWP's separate, biennial season-setting process.

***Comment:** I oppose this land purchase. Taking more land out of private hands for the state to gain more control continues to deprive Montanans of their chance to own more than just small parcels in and around town and cities (A-27).*

FWP Response: In 2010, FWP acquired 40,175 acres from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to form the Fish Creek WMA (34,573 acres) and Fish Creek State Park (5,602 acres) (see Footnote 3). The Five Valleys Land Trust 148-acre addition to the WMA in early 2015, and the Rehbein addition in 2016 resulted in the WMA's current 35,041 acres. These properties were formerly owned by Plum Creek Timber Company (PCTC), as was the Main-Stem Koch property. These properties were sold to private buyers prior to TNC's acquisition of the PCTC lands in Fish Creek. Under PCTC ownership, the property had been open for public use. FWP purchased the Fish Creek WMA property for the long-term protection of fish and wildlife habitat and for the public to continue to be able to access and enjoy.

***Comment:** I support the acquisition of these parcels provided that recreational, hunting, and fishing access is maintained (A-41).*

FWP Response: These parcels will be open to the public year-round for recreational use including hunting and fishing.

***Comment:** I am totally in favor of this land acquisition. I am 71 years old and have lived in Missoula my whole life and have seen where a simple act would have changed things in the future. This is one of those, usually it goes the other way and is ruined for the public. I do hope access will be restricted to non motorized (A-43).*

1. **FWP Response:** Public recreation opportunities include: fishing, hunting, hiking, horseback riding, and other non-motorized recreation. Motorized vehicles must stay on designated roads. The only motorized access is via the main Fish Creek road which runs through the Main Stem property.

Comments: Weeds--

1. *I also request FWP do the following to support access for the public. . . Provide weed control where it is the worst (A-3b.9).*
2. *I'm in favor of FWP acquisition subject to the following: . . . Use of chemical weed control either not be used or should be kept to an absolute minimum. Application by aircraft should be prohibited (EA, pg 14) (A-9.2).*

3. *I oppose because of the way you've managed the woods so far--leafy spurge at Tarkio and we asked them to spray the roadside for the spurge and FWP did not. Have not done a good job managing St. John's Wort where identified. Haven't been doing a good job with the land we've got (B-3).*

FWP Response: Weed management is an important component of our overall habitat management program on the WMA. Weeds provide very little nutrition for native ungulates; therefore, it is important to reduce weed density and encourage growth of native bunchgrasses and shrubs that are important forage for mule deer, white-tailed deer, and elk. Weed spraying is conducted by vehicle and helicopter and not in riparian areas near creeks and tributaries. Vehicle spraying occurs primarily along roads. FWP believes the overall benefit of weed spraying outweighs the risk.

FWP uses a combination of chemical spraying and biological control (insects) to manage weeds on the WMA. FWP personnel and private contractors routinely spray open and closed roads and parking areas with the herbicide Milestone® at a rate of 6 ounces to the acre.

FWP personnel released 12,000+ *Aphthona spp* mix (a mix of flea beetle species) at 5 sites on leafy spurge in the Nemote Creek area in 2014. Two of the releases are along a common boundary with a neighbor to the southwest. Herbicide treatment to these areas in the past has been only somewhat successful.

Comment: *These 2 acquisitions should never happen. Just another nail in the coffin to closing the whole Fish Creek area to the public. I see this as just another "Y to Y"/ Agenda 21 pursuit by an out of control MT Fish and Game. You are trying to build a wolf sanctuary --- needs to stopped now (A-51).*

FWP Response: Fish Creek WMA and State Park are open to the public year-round except for a small portion of the WMA between Deer Creek and Wig Creek that is closed in the winter (Dec 1–May 15) to protect wintering wildlife. Wolf management in Fish Creek allows for a hunting season that runs from the first Saturday in September–March 15 and a trapping season from Dec 15–Feb 28. Five wolves can be harvested per person via any combination of hunting/trapping. Trapping on Fish Creek WMA is allowed by special permit and annual drawing in 7 trapping units, including a special allowance for trapping within the winter-closure area.

Comment: *I don't oppose this particular purchase but am concerned about the future purchases. Stipulations come with Pittman-Robertson [Wildlife Restoration Act, 1937]. Nothing wrong with this project on its own--glad for the FWP property tax, but there's so much public land in Mineral County. [Only] 7% private land in Mineral County--granted FWP is paying vacant land taxes, but it's not the same as if the land is being developed. I'm not necessarily nixing this particular piece of land but looking at the big picture, we're opposed to purchasing any more public land. So, Mineral County has to be opposed (B-8, page 1).*

FWP Response: FWP pays the same amount in county taxes as a private landowner. However, we do recognize that if the properties were to be developed, there would be opportunity for a higher tax rate to the county. Since the Main-Stem property is currently one legal "lot" and FWP plans no buildings, that presents a lost opportunity in this regard.

Comment: *Talked about power [electric and utilities]and this is the last piece crossing the checkerboard to prevent modern day improvements up the drainage. This is the last nail in the coffin for future power. The horse is out of the barn now and this little purchase won't make a lot of difference, but people should be aware. Want people to think about the future big picture (B-8, page 2).*

FWP Response: The Main-Stem property is the last undeveloped property up Fish Creek with a Northwestern Energy utility easement and power runs directly to the property. Any decisions to run power further up Fish Creek are complicated by encumbrances on WMA property purchased with federal (Pittman-Robertson) money that stipulates management decisions must benefit wildlife. This issue would remain, regardless of who would own the Koch properties. However, decisions regarding utility lines through the WMA are outside the scope of this process.

REGIONAL SUPERVISOR'S RECOMMENDATION ON FWP'S PURCHASE OF THE KOCH ADDITION TO THE FISH CREEK WMA

Based upon the Environmental Assessment (EA) and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, FWP has determined that the proposed action will not have measurable negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, we conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

With the corrections and clarifications as noted in this Decision Notice, we adopt the Draft EA as final.

This proposal for FWP to purchase the 276-acre inholdings and add them to the Fish Creek WMA received overwhelming public support during the public review period. Supporters emphasized the benefits of protecting these important fish and wildlife habitats, as well as the public hunting, fishing, and recreational access that would accrue from the purchase. Therefore, I am pleased to recommend to the Fish and Wildlife Commission that it approve this proposal for FWP to complete this purchase and manage it as part of the Fish Creek WMA.



Randy Arnold
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

5/22/2018

Date

APPENDIX A. Comments on the proposed Koch addition to Fish Creek WMA, received by FWP during the Draft-EA comment period of March 14 through April 13, 2018. (Comments received via E = email, M = mail, PM.)

Com- men- ter #	Via	Para- graph	Comment
1	E		I would like to voice my support for this land acquisition. As a majority of the funds for this come from Pittman-Robertson dollars and other generous donors (TU and Northwestern Energy) the only short term budgetary consideration is a meager \$200k from FWP. This represents about 20 cents per Montanan, seems like a no brainer. In the broader perspective, the habitat management consistency and removal of the sure to be subdivision of this land in the future sure seems like a win for Montanans.
2	E	1	The ownership of the NW1/4 Sec 34, T14N-R25 (adjacent to the Whitehorse parcel) is shown on the map [Figure 1] in this EA as being state trust land.
		2	This particular parcel was exchanged to the National Forest in December of 2010 in the Lolo Land Exchange.
3a	E	1	Is This expanded real estate a part of the Fish Creek State Park?
		2	The expanded real estate and access should include ATV access using existing roads/trails to create a 30 to 40 mile loop ride including the FCSP.
3b	E	1	Reference: Draft EA Fish Creek WMA Proposed Acquisition of Koch Inholdings. Alberton Meeting
		2	I support the proposed acquisition of the two areas defined in the EA for all that it does for the wildlife of the area.
		3	I also request FWP do the following to support access for the public.
		4	1. Provide vehicle parking areas for fishers and hikers.
		5	2. Provide public access to the Whitehorse track. That means no closed gates except during hunting season.
		6	3. Provide public access to existing logging roads in the Whitehorse track for motorized and non motorized use (ATV, bikes, snowmobiles, hike, & horseback).
		7	4. Provide public access to existing logging roads in the Fish Creek State Park. That means no closed gates. Open gates at Mile 7 of road 341 and roads off of Williams pass junction, and roads off 341 south of the pass.
		8	5. Provide public access to existing logging roads to connect Williams pass and the Whitehorse track.
		9	6. Provide weed control where it is the worst.
		10	The overall intent is to provide public access to greatest number of Montanans and other visitors who are not able to hike 10 to 20 miles of mountains.
4	E		As a Montana resident and avid hunter/fisherman I am favor of this acquisition. An increase in public access and recreational opportunities is always a win.
5	E		Great idea
6	E		I am all in favor of this Fish Creek acquisition.
7	E		Thanks much! It is posted on the Community Calendar at www.MineralCommunityHospital.org so keep 'em coming!
8	E		Thanks for sending this. What is the deadline for comments?
9	M	1	I'm in favor of FWP acquisition of the Koch property, subject to the following:
		2	1. Use of chemical weed control either not be used or should be kept to an absolute minimum. Application by aircraft should be prohibited (EA, pg 14).
		3	2. the Draft EA says the "forests on these parcels would be manages to support forest health . . . (EA, pg 14). Those words usually imply logging, which I would prefer not take place. (Nature has done a pretty good job over the millennia of keeping forests "healthy.")
		4	3. The cabin on the property should be removed ASAP.

10			Sounds like a good thing , but you should ask the 454 people that where for the limited permit area for mule deer in HD 103 just in case seeing they are the majority of the Montana peopke, or maybe purchase it and make all animals in that area limited permit because making limited permit areas apparently give hunting opportunities not take opportunities away. FWP is curupt so it doesn't matter at the end. The letters that where submitted wanting names and email addresses could of been faked , check this email out
11	E		sounds like a good idea to me.
12	E		I absolutely support this. The last thing we need is another subdivision going in, let's keep Montana wild .
13	E		I strongly support the acquisition of this additional 276 acres to the already existing Fish Creek WMA. This is important habitat for wildlife, is beautiful riparian habitat, and is the type of land we don't want subdivided. Montanans in the future will be glad we had set it aside in the name of the public.
14	E		I support the proposed acquisition of the two properties. I think this is a wonderful opportunity and will benefit wintering deer and elk by reducing potential development and building in the area.
15	E		I am in favor of these purchases because I believe it is important to preserve this area in its natural state and to prevent future development of these irreplaceable lands.
16	E		This purchase would be a great step in showing FWP's priority of ensuring quality habitat stays connected. These are the types of purchases that when looked back upon will be seen as pivotal for the future of conservation. People need public land to connect with nature. Please support this purchase!
17	E		The Fish Creek WMA is a beautiful and important piece of public land used by myself and many people I know. More importantly, it's vital habitat for fish and wildlife. Securing the additional 300 acres would help preserve wintering habitat for many wildlife and maintain valuable bull trout habitat. I support the acquisition of these properties to help ensure the long-term viability of the Fish Creek watershed.
18	E	1	I am writing this letter in support of the MTFWP acquiring the two parcels located in the Fish Creek Drainage West of Missoula Montana, specifically the Whitehorse parcel and Main Stem Fish Creek parcel. These 2 parcels would help secure 2 key inholdings in the Fish Creek WMA, protecting quality fish and wildlife habitat, as well as securing long-term recreational opportunities. I have done considerable amounts of recreating in this area in the past, and would like to see these parcels acquired for future generations. Quality pieces of property like this are often times developed, which can lead to all kinds of issues for the surrounding public lands. Things like weed infestations, stream siltation, loss of winter range habitat, loss of species diversity, etc. are most likely the result of development.
		2	For these reasons I highly encourage this proposal move forward and that the MTFWP acquire these 2 parcels.
19	E	1	Fish Creek is perhaps the closest land to my heart in all Montana. It is where I first learned to hunt, track deer, saw a moose, learned bears climbed trees. Until it was washed out two years ago, my favorite fishing hole in all of the state was on Fish Creek. I could probably drive from the interstate and name every drainage as we drove by them. There is incredible history that I imagine few know about.
		2	I urge you to complete this sale and return these lands to public lands.
20	E		I'm writing in support of this acquisition. This land provides some winter range, important travel corridors for wildlife and important fish habitat. The purchase will ensure the land is not further developed and opens more land to public use.
21	E	1	I strongly support this land acquisition. My family and I return to Montana every year to recreate, fish, and hunt. We do so because you of the incredible habitats and landscapes.
		2	Development is much easier to avoid than to reverse, and the value of fisheries hab in this drainage should make this an easy decision. I am a huge advocate for moving forward with this purchase.
22	E		I support the addition of the Main Stem Fish Creek parcel and the Whitehorse parcel to the FCWMA.
23	E		I am in favor of this proposal. Increase public access and protect important habitat.

24	E		I fully support MT FWP's acquisition of these two parcels. Given the area's relative proximity to Missoula and surrounding communities, these lands provide a prime opportunity to enhance the public's access to public lands and fishing opportunities along Fish Creek. We continually lose big game winter habitat with every valley bottom that's developed. This roject provides an opportunity to secure such habitat in an area where elk populations are still recovering. Thank you.
25	E		I wholly support FWP's acquisition of the proposed parcels for management within the Fish Creek WMA. Fish Creek is one of the last, best "creeks" in Western Montana that remains healthy enough to support a vibrant native trout population. and a robust population of game, wildlife, and the flora upon which they subsist. I spend several weeks each year fishing and exploring Fish Creek from top to bottom, and I believe it is critical that this cold-water fishery and natural habitat be preserved for generations to come. I realize many "local" interests resist public ownership and management of the majority of Fish Creek's riverbanks and surrounding lands, but I believe much of that resistance ignores the multitude of public uses FWP's ownership/management of these lands support, and the revenues Fish Creek generates for Mineral County through the public's recreational use of the resource. Again, I support the proposal 110% and I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important topic.
26	E	1	I am writing in favor of the purchase of the Koch properties by FWP within the Fish Creek WMA. I think FWP has done a fantastic job keeping this drainage intact and wild. These purchases would fit in nicely with the heritage of the how this drainage has become public land through the Montana Legacy Project purchase from TNC, and additional Hulme and Rehbein purchases of 2014 and 2015.
		2	Fish creek continues to provide vast ecological and recreational value to Western Montana. Securing this land for the people of Montana would be a wise investment in ours and our children's futures.
27	E		I oppose this land purchase. Taking more land out of private hands for the state to gain more control continues to deprive Montanans of their chance to own more than just small parcels in and around town and cities.
28	E		Please acquire that addition to the Fish Creek WMA. It will be a wise investment on behalf of generations of outdoor users.
29	E		This is a great idea. I fully support this purchase. The previous purchase made by FWP in the area of the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area is an incredible success story. This is a great opportunity for all people who enjoy the outdoors.
30	E		I fully support this acquisition. Fish Creek is a gem from local as well as traveling anglers (me). This acquisition allows user to not have to consult some ownership map when fishing the lower section, which makes life much easier for the casual user.
31	E		Please mark me as a YES for the purchase of 276 acres of private land within the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area that is currently private land for wildlife and recreation. As a hunter and someone that buys hunting and fishing licenses simply to support FWP and wildlife, I want my money to go for ANY purchase of any private land for such projects. I wish we could use our hunting and fishing tag money for more land.
32	E		I strongly support the acquisition of the 276 acre parcel by the State of Montana.
33	E		The Fish Creek drainage is a special place for both wildlife and public recreation. The acquisition of these two parcels by FWP would help maintain the strong history of public use that this area has had for many decades. Not taking this step risks the future development of these inholdings and the loss of important winter range for the local deer and elk herds.
34	E		<i>[See page A-7 for comment from Five Valleys Audubon Society]</i>
35	E		The subsequent Fish Creek purchase /proposal is a good idea and a good investment in our public lands efforts...
36	E		I support the purchase of these lands.
37	E		I believe these properties would be a great addition to the existing FCWMA. They are much more useful to the public as a natural recreational area rather than a possible subdivision.
38	E		I'm in favor of acquiring fee title to 276 acres.
39	E	1	I very much support this acquisition. Managing under one consolidated ownership is much more effective and efficient, than managing under mixed ownership.

		2	The riparian resources on these properties will add substantially to the value of the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area.
		3	This is a sensible acquisition. Thank you
40	E		This would be a great step forward for the Fish Creek area. I've fished, hiked and hunted this area for a good portion of earlier years.
41	E		I support the acquisition of these parcels provided that recreational, hunting, and fishing access is maintained.
42	E	1	We have been landowners and residents of Mineral County for almost 20 years. We were married at the Hole in the Wall in 1996. We reside at Cyr which is near the 276 acres FWP is proposing to purchase.
		2	We have seen many changes up Fish Creek these past 20 years. We now have a gravel pit in Daigle Flats which is a known calving area and winter range for elk and other wildlife. We did not support this but the DEQ did not consider our viewpoints and opinions and allowed the gravel pit and asphalt plant into this area. We have watched Plum Creek sell off parcels of critical creek access land to private landowners who have now fenced off the land not allowing any public access. Needless to say, Fish Creek has changed drastically. We are very grateful that FWP was able to purchase the 35,041 acre WMA otherwise we hate to think what Fish Creek would have become.
		3	We relocated to Montana, specifically Mineral County, because of our love of the Fish Creek area, the abundant wildlife, beautiful landscape, the access to public land and, at the time, access to Plum Creek land. We support any effort to protect the habitat for deer, elk, moose and other wildlife and the fisheries habitat along and within Fish Creek. We also support this effort because it will keep these 276 acres publicly owned and protect them from the purchase and potential subdivision by outsiders who have no understanding or appreciation for what we hold dear. We understand that the State will pay property tax to Mineral County just as a private landowner so the county should not lose money on this transaction.
		4	We apologize we are not able to attend the public hearing in Alberton on March 22 to show our support for this endeavor.
		5	If you have any questions, please let me know.
43	E		I am totally in favor of this land acquisition. I am 71 years old and have lived in Missoula my whole life and have seen where a simple act would have changed things in the future. This is one of those, usually it goes the other way and is ruined for the public. I do hope access will be restricted to non motorized.
44	E		<i>[See page A-8 for comment from Idaho Forest Group]</i>
45	E		Comment in support of these acquisitions to add high quality game and fish habitat to the Fish Creek WMA.
46	M		For quite a few years I have fished the Clark Fork River regularly in areas from Missoula to St Regis. I am very interested in the health of this fishery and its potential improvement. That is why I am enthused about the proposed land acquisition of Fish Creek parcels, one of which includes a key tributary of the Clark Fork. Focusing on the fishery aspect, I very much support the acquisition of the added 1.2 miles along the main stem of Fish Creek. This would help ensure the health of the fisheries in the Clark Fork system, especially the threatened bull trout, and the west slope cutthroat. What better way to do that then by conserving and managing prime spawning and rearing habitat for these fish, and their migration route through the system and to and from the Clark Fork River. This acquisition would limit development and its related effects on this land and habitat. I am also pleased by the added non-motorized, recreational access to these lands which is not currently available. Mineral County should continue to reap benefits from a healthy and improving Clark Fork system. I am associated with two fly fishing clubs from Seattle and Spokane, both of which have large, several day gatherings at St. Regis or Superior most years.
47	M		I am an avid fly fisherwoman who has fished, hiked and camped up Fish Creek. I support the purchase of the 276 acres from Randy Koch by FWP. At this time on our planet it is more important than ever to maintain the integrity of nature and all things wild. These two parcels of land are a gift to all Montanans and a legacy we can leave future generations. Thank you for your time.
48	E		I live in Alberton and wholeheartedly support this acquisition -- as a Mineral Co resident and as a public lands recreator, particularly flyfishing, hiking, and camping. My husband is a hunter and we are in agreement that supporting intact wildlife habitat should be of highest priority to the state of Montana.

49	E		I am highly in favor of this land acquisition. The Fish Creek drainage has been seriously damaged by past checkerboard ownership and lack of comprehensive management strategy. To bring these lands under a unified management philosophy with clear goals of restoration and habitat enhancement is the right thing to do. This is great opportunity to prevent further degradation of Fish Creek at a reasonable cost for these parcels.
50	E	1	I support Alternate B, to purchase the 160-acre main-stem property and 116-acre Whitehorse property from Randy Koch as an addition to the FCWMA. I see no reason not to purchase this land from Randy Koch. In fact I'd like to THANK Mr. Koch for offering it to the FWP instead of selling to a private party!!!
		2	This addition to FCWMA will make managing all the public land around easier for all agencies.
		3	Please approve. Thank You.
51	E		Hello, these 2 acquisitions should never happen. Just another nail in the coffin to closing the whole Fish Creek area to the public. I see this as just another "Y to Y"/ Agenda 21 pursuit by an out of control MT Fish and Game. You are trying to build a wolf sanctuary --- needs to stopped now.
52	E		<i>[See page A-9 for comment from WestSlope Chapter, Trout Unlimited]</i>
53	E	1	We purchased our land in the Cyr area 18 years ago and just recently moved here to make this area our full time home. We made the decision to buy and settle here based on our love of the wilderness environment & are pleased there is an effort being made to assure the wilderness of this area is preserved.
		2	We are in full support of the acquisition of an additional 276 acres to the Fish Creek Wildlife Area.
54	E		<i>[See page A-10 for comment from Montana Chapter, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers]</i>
55	E	1	The Shining Mountains Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association supports the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks proposed acquisition of the two Koch inholdings within the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area. These parcels total 276 acres and include 1.2 miles of riparian habitat along Fish Creek.
		2	The health of the middle Clark Fork River is directly related to the health of Fish Creek and its forks. Native Bull trout and west slope cutthroat trout spawn in the forks and tributaries of Fish Creek. Once the trout grow larger, they leave Fish Creek and spend their adult life in the Clark Fork, returning to the Fish Creek forks and tributaries to spawn.
		3	The riparian habitat in the main stem parcel along Fish Creek (160 acres) also provides habitat for song birds and small mammals and wintering habitat for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose.
		4	The proposed acquisition also includes the 116-acre Whitehorse parcel that lies between Fish Creek and the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness in the Lolo National Forest. This parcel provides wintering habitat for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose and ensures connectivity between Fish Creek and the Great Burn for other wildlife, including wolverine, Canada lynx, and in years to come, grizzly bears.
		5	Both acquisitions would ensure public access to these parcels, which are now closed to public access by the landowner. These two parcels of private land are integral to the wildlife management area and their acquisition assures they will be managed in ways that are compatible with the remaining 35,041 acres in the wildlife management area.
56	E		<i>[See page A-11 for comment from Great Burn Study Group]</i>
57a	E		<i>[See page A-13 for comment from Hellgate Hunters & Anglers]</i>
57b	PM		<i>[See Appendix B: Public Meeting testimony, Commenter #11]</i>
58	E		<i>[See page A-15 for comment from Montana Wildlife Federation]</i>
59	E		<i>[See page A-17 or comment from Trout Unlimited]</i>
60	E		The acquisition of the 276 acre parcel adjacent to the Fish Creek WMA has my full support!
61	E		I would really enjoy this parcel being open to the public. It is an important area for cut throats and bull trout. I cannot imagine it becoming broken up into cabins and no longer being able to show my children how great of an area that is.

62	E		I fully support FWP's proposal to acquire more acreage in the Fish Creek WMA.
63	E		I support the purchase of this property for the recreational use by the public.
64	E		I am strongly in favor of FWP's proposed acquisition of both parcels near the Fish Creek WMA. I believe the acquisition of these lands will further supplement existing habitat for native species including deer, elk, moose, cutthroat and bull trout. The designation as both Tier 1 terrestrial and aquatic regional areas reveals how important these parcels are. There is no downside to this acquisition, especially considering matching funds from partner groups. This land should be protected from development.
65	E		I support the acquisition of these in-holdings by FWP in the Fish Creek drainage. As a hunter and angler, intact habitats are important to me.
66	E		I would like to voice my support of the acquisition of the private land parcels available in the fish creek drainage. Being able to gain access to the creek and prevent possible development are both things that would be beneficial to the area.
67	E	1	As a Montana resident and hunter, I totally support the Montana's Dept. of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks acquisition of 276 acres of private land within the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area
		2	I would have responded sooner, but I only recently heard about the proposed acquisition. Good luck!!
68	E	1	I strongly support the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area Proposed Acquisition of Koch Inholdings, as described in the March 2018 environmental analysis. This is an exceptional chance to obtain key recreational land for the public and to conserve top-notch fish and wildlife habitat. The proposal also helps protect the considerable existing public investment in the Fish Creek WMA.
		2	We are fortunate that the current private landowner is willing to sell these parcels at their appraised value. The alternative — which we have seen in too many areas across Montana that have similar stream and forest attributes — is for these lands to be developed with second homes, locked gates, and no-trespassing signs. Also as we have seen across Montana, that kind of development damages public recreation and fish & wildlife habitat over a much larger area than just the developed acreage, removing many square miles from hunting and other recreation when homes are built in the middle of an expanse of public open space.
		3	Stream parcels with the quality of Fish Creek are rare and often much more expensive than proposed here. Moreover, easily accessible stream parcels (like this one on Fish Creek) provide great family recreation opportunities, supporting our kids and maintaining the public outdoor heritage that all Montanans value so highly.
		4	This is a good deal and the public will obtain great benefit from its approval. Thanks for putting it together and for the opportunity to comment. I urge the decisionmakers at all levels to move forward on this project and complete this land acquisition.
69	E		<i>[See page A-18 for comment from Montana Trout Unlimited]</i>
70	E		<i>[See page A-19 for comment from Five Valleys Land Trust]</i>
71	E		<i>[See page A-20 for comment from Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup]</i>

Comment 34

From: rleach-2@bresnan.net
Sent: Tuesday, March 20, 2018 4:19 PM
To: Rose, Sharon
Subject: 34 (FVAS, Leach)--Public Comment: Fish Creek WMA, Koch Addition--Draft EA

Name: Rosemary Leach
City: Missoula
Hi Sharon and FWP,

Five Valleys Audubon, Missoula, would like to go on record supporting the purchase of the Koch inholdings in the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area. The purchase of inholdings is important in minimizing fragmentation and maintaining habitat corridors for wildlife use. The purchase is also important to maintain access for the public, as well as to maintain land uses that are compatible with fish and wildlife protection and management. Thanks for sending this proposal.

Sincerely, Rosemary Leach, Certified Wildlife Biologist, President, Five Valleys Audubon Society, Missoula

This e-mail was generated from the 'Fish Creek WMA, Koch Addition--Draft EA' Public Notice Web Page.

Comment 44

March 21, 2018

Region 2 Fish Wildlife and Parks
Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT. 59804

VIA Email: shrose@mt.gov

Subject: **Proposed land acquisition within Fish Creek WMA.** Please include us in all future correspondence related to this issue.

To Whom It May Concern,

These comments are being offered on behalf of the Idaho Forest Group (IFG) in St. Regis, Montana. We are excited to be part of the business community here in Montana with the recent purchase of the sawmill in St. Regis. Our primary focus is the purchase of timber and production and sale of quality lumber. However, we are staunch supporters of projects and programs that improve wildlife and recreational opportunities in Montana.

The purchase of critical habitats such as the Whitehorse and Main Stem Fish Creek Parcels by Montana FWP and adding them to the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area is strongly supported by IFG. The addition of 1.2 miles of riparian and fisheries habitat is critical to the continued management of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.

Many of our employees utilize the Fish Creek drainage for fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, and many other activities. The purchase of this property will increase access and improve recreational activities along the Fish Creek corridor.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this proposed action.

Respectfully,

William R Peck, IFG Forestry
406-822-2536
willy.peck@idfg.com

Comment 52



March 22.18

Sharon Rose
Comments Coordinator, Region 2
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
3201 Spurgin Rd
Missoula, MT 59804

RE: Fish Creek WMA, Koch Addition

The WestSlope Chapter of Trout Unlimited, a conservation and fly fishing education group with 887 members, is in favor of FWP making this land acquisition in Fish Creek. Fish Creek represents ideal spawning habitat for west slope cutthroat trout and bull trout. This particular section is ideal for these species and will be protected forever from development which could threaten these fish.

This is a particularly important purchase as it solidifies public land and public access by tying into the Fish Creek WMA and the State Park Property.

To show our support of this purchase, the WestSlope Chapter of Trout Unlimited has pledged \$10,000 to its purchase. We believe this is money well spent for our Chapter, our community and our state.

Thank you,

Mark Kuipers, President
WestSlope Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Comment 54

March 18th, 2018

Sharon Rose
Region 2 MTFWP Comment Coordinator
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, Montana 59804



To Ms. Sharon Rose:

The Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers supports the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks and their proposal to acquire two parcels totaling 276 acres in the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area. This includes the 116-acre Whitehorse parcel and the 160-acre Main-Stem Fish Creek parcel.

The Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers strives to protect large parcels of backcountry fish and wildlife habitat as well as the opportunity for traditional non-motorized hunting and fishing experiences. The primary benefits of acquiring this property are highly aligned with our organization's values: Protecting forest and riparian corridor that provides vital habitat for wintering elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose; protected wildlife connectivity areas; protecting some of the habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout; securing 1.2 miles of riparian habitat along Fish Creek; and maintaining the integrity of the Fish Creek WMA.

Our members want to see the proposed parcels purchased by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks so they can be managed for the benefit of fish and wildlife and for public access. It is fitting that these parcels are being purchased largely using funds raised through the purchase of hunting licenses, the sale of guns and ammunition, and from Montana Trout Unlimited. Whether we're just spending a day on the stream or in the woods, are hunting deer, elk, grouse or bear, are stalking trout, or are watching a big bull trout snatch the trout off the end of our line, these acquisitions will allow all users quality outdoors experiences in perpetuity.

Our members include 2,000 Montana hunters, anglers and others who support the mission of ensuring North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting, through education and work on behalf of wild public lands and waters.

Sincerely,

Hannah J. Nikonow, Region 2 Board Member
The Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
12 Orchard Court
Missoula, Montana 59803
h.nikonow@gmail.com

Comment 56



56
1434 Jackson Street
Missoula, Montana 59802
PHONE 406 240-9901
FAX 406 829 1501

March 29, 2018

Randy Arnold
Regional Supervisor
FWP Region 2
3201 Spurgin Rd.
Missoula, MT 59804

RE: Fish Creek WMA-Proposed Koch Addition

Dear Mr. Arnold,

The Great Burn Study Group (GBSG) Board of Directors and staff wish to extend our support for the proposed MTFWP acquisition of an additional 276 acres to the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA). GBSG is a local conservation organization based in Missoula. GBSG's mission is to conserve the wild and remote character of the northern Bitterroot Mountains along the Montana/Idaho stateline. Fish Creek is of great importance to GBSG, not only because of its proximity to the proposed Great Burn Wilderness, but also because of the drainage's local and regional significance for wildlife and native fisheries.

As you know, national, regional state government wildlife agencies and other organizations have identified the Fish Creek area as a high-quality wildlife corridor and part of a regional wildlife movement zone linking the Selway-Bitterroot to the Northern Continental Divide and Selkirk-Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystems. Locally, Fish Creek is part of a wildlife linkage zone between the Ninemile Valley and the Fish Creek/Petty Creek area. In addition, a well-known wildlife movement area exists between Burdette Creek and the proposed Great Burn Wilderness which provides passage for elk moving to winter range. Also, the Fish Creek drainage is a stronghold for genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout and supports the largest fluvial bull trout population in the middle Clark Fork drainage.

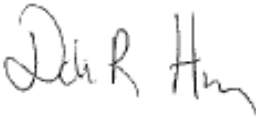
GBSG supports FWP's proposal to acquire the additional acreage for the WMA. The proposed addition would provide benefits far beyond its boundaries by permanently protecting a half mile of the main stem of Fish Creek and its riparian area from habitat degradation. We have further comments and concerns below.

We urge FWP to place priority on fish and wildlife management for the Fish Creek WMA and the addition, and therefore we recommend that FWP not provide any formal development on the site. There is a developed area nearby (Forks) which should offer all the facilities needed to accommodate the public in this area.

Members of GBSG's board and staff have served on the Mineral County Resource Advisory Committee since its inception, and also own property in Mineral County. We support this acquisition as it will enable public access which we know to be an important issue for county residents. If the property were sold to a private individual, this access would be at stake.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. This additional acquisition represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect the quality of life in western Montana and to maintain the core values that make western Montana such a special place.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dale R. Harris". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dale" being the most prominent.

Dale Harris
Executive Director



P.O. BOX 7792 MISSOULA, MT 59807 (406) 241-3121
www.hellgatehuntersandanglers.org

February 12, 2018

C/O Sharon Rose
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 2
3201 Spurgin Rd.
Missoula, MT 59804

RE: Fish Creek WMA Inholding Acquisition

Dear Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks,

Hellgate Hunters and Anglers (HHA) works to conserve Montana's wildlife, wild places, and fair-chase hunting and fishing heritage. On behalf of HHA's 400+ members and supporters, we strongly support the department's acquisition of the Koch inholdings in the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area. Acquisition of these two parcels of private land assures they will be managed compatibly with the rest of the wildlife management area.

The Fish Creek area represents some of the most important spawning habitat for west slope cutthroat trout and bull trout in the middle portion of the Clark Fork. Fish spawned in Fish Creek tributaries migrate to the Clark Fork as they grow larger, so the health of the Fish Creek drainage supports the entire system. This area has seen its share of heavy logging and other abuses over the years, but the fishery and riparian areas flourish with wildlife. Many of our members recreate in the Fish Cr. drainage and the purchase of these critical inholdings will be a boon to the areas hunters and anglers.

The riparian habitat in the main stem parcel along Fish Creek (160 acres) also provides habitat for song birds and small mammals and wintering habitat for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose.

The proposed acquisition also includes the 116-acre Whitehorse parcel between Fish Creek and the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness. This parcel provides wintering habitat for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose and ensures connectivity between Fish Creek and the Great Burn for other wildlife, including wolverine and Canada lynx.

Hunting and fishing dollars largely fund this purchase: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (\$622,500, Pittman-Robertson), Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (\$207,500, Habitat Montana), Northwestern Energy (\$60,000), and Montana Trout Unlimited (\$10,000).

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on this acquisition that will benefit Montana's fish and wildlife and Montana's hunters and anglers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kit Fischer", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kit Fischer
President, Heligate Hunters and Anglers

Comment 58



Protecting Montana's wildlife,
land, waters and hunting & fishing
heritage for future generations.

April 2, 2018

C/O Sharon Rose
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 2
3201 Spurgin Rd.
Missoula, MT 59804

RE: Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area Inholding Acquisition

Dear Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks,

Since 1936, the Montana Wildlife Federation has worked to protect fish and wildlife and their habitat in Montana. Our members strongly supported the department's acquisition of the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and we support acquisition of the Koch inholdings, which consists of two parcels of private land integral to the overall WMA. Their acquisition assures their management will be compatible with the remaining 35,041 acres of Fish Creek WMA.

Fish Creek and its tributaries represent some of the most important spawning habitat for west slope cutthroat trout and bull trout in the middle portion of the Clark Fork River. These two species spawn in the tributaries, where the young begin their growth. Once the fish are larger, they migrate downstream to the Clark Fork, returning to the tributaries to spawn after they reach maturity.

The riparian area in the main stem parcel along Fish Creek (160 acres) also provides habitat for song birds, small mammals and wintering habitat for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer and moose.

The proposed acquisition also includes the 116-acre Whitehorse parcel that lies between Fish Creek and the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness Area in the Lolo National Forest. This parcel provides wintering habitat for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose and ensures connectivity between Fish Creek and the Great Burn for other wildlife, including wolverine and Canada lynx. A radio-collared grizzly bear moved through the Fish Creek drainage in recent years. In the future, grizzlies may reoccupy this portion of their habitat in western Montana.

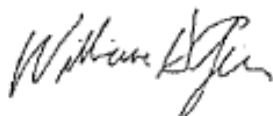
Public access is an important priority for MWF and its members. These acquisitions would assure public access to these parcels in perpetuity.

Hunter dollars are largely funding this purchase: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (\$622,500, Pittman-Robertson), Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (\$207,500, Habitat Montana), Northwestern Energy (\$60,000), and Montana Trout Unlimited (\$10,000). These important contributions show the commitment of Montana hunters to protect important habitat to

ensure wildlife abundance as well as protect key areas to prevent fracturing of habitat.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on this acquisition that will benefit Montana's wildlife and Montana's resident and nonresident hunters and anglers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William Geer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "William" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Geer".

Bill Geer
President

Comment 59



Rob Roberts
Project Manager

April 5, 2018

RE: Fish Creek Acquisition

Dear Sir or Madam:

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to acquire fee title to approximately 276 acres from a private party, as an addition to FWP's adjacent 35,041-acre Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (FCWMA). FWP's stated purpose for purchasing the land is to manage the important habitat (including 1.2 miles of riparian and fisheries habitat along Fish Creek) for deer, elk and other wildlife, and to prevent this habitat from potentially being developed or subdivided.

Trout Unlimited (TU) enthusiastically supports this proposal, based on the high value for fish and wildlife and the increased public access and recreational opportunities in managing the property as part of FCWMA.

TU has actively worked on both public and private land in the Fish Creek watershed and continues to consider Fish Creek as a high priority area for conservation, protection, and restoration of aquatic resources in the Clark Fork River basin. TU has developed, funded and implemented numerous projects in Fish Creek, including the decommissioning of more than 100 miles of abandoned logging roads, removal of more than 70 culverts or stream crossings and instream habitat restoration on more than 5 miles of mainstem Fish Creek.

Expanding the FCWMA will also help continue to provide key public access to Fish Creek. The area provides many public recreation opportunities such as fishing, boating and hiking, which is important for our members and the community. Thank you for your consideration of this important project, and please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about our support.

Sincerely,

Rob Roberts



P.O. Box 7186 Missoula, MT 59807 (406) 543-0054

5 April 2018

RE: Fish Creek Acquisition

Dear Sir or Madam:

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to acquire fee title to approximately 276 acres from a private party, as an addition to FWP's adjacent 35,041-acre Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (FCWMA). FWP's stated purpose for purchasing the land is to manage the important habitat (including 1.2 miles of riparian and fisheries habitat along Fish Creek) for deer, elk and other wildlife, and to prevent this habitat from potentially being developed or subdivided.

Representing our approximately 4,300 members statewide, Montana Trout Unlimited (MTU) enthusiastically supports this proposal, based on the high value for fish and wildlife and the increased public access and recreational opportunities in managing the property as part of FCWMA.

MTU has actively worked on both public and private land in the Fish Creek watershed and continues to consider Fish Creek as a high priority area for conservation, protection, and restoration of aquatic resources in the Clark Fork River basin, including native westslope cutthroat trout. Along with our national TU partners, MTU has developed, funded and implemented numerous projects in Fish Creek, including the decommissioning of more than 100 miles of abandoned logging roads, removal of more than 70 culverts or stream crossings and instream habitat restoration on more than 5 miles of mainstem Fish Creek.

Expanding the FCWMA will also help continue to provide key public access to Fish Creek. The area provides many public recreation opportunities such as fishing, boating and hiking, which is important for our members and the community. Thank you for your consideration of this important project, and please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about our support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "David Brooks".

David Brooks, Executive Director, Montana Trout Unlimited

Comment 70



120 Hickory Street, Suite B
Missoula, MT 59801
406.549.0755 www.fvlt.org

#7

April 9, 2018

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
Attn: Randy Arnold
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804

RE: Fish Creek WMA, Koch Addition

Dear Mr. Arnold,

Five Valleys Land Trust (Five Valleys) supports the proposed 276-acre Koch addition to the 35,041-acre Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (Fish Creek WMA). The proposed addition would conserve important fish and wildlife habitat and connectivity, provide additional public access, and improve Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' (FWP) management of the Fish Creek WMA.

When FWP acquired the Fish Creek WMA from The Nature Conservancy as part of the Montana Legacy Project, there were several key private inholdings that were not included in the conservation effort. The unprotected status of these parcels threatens the connectivity that is essential for fish and wildlife, especially for bull trout recovery. The proposed addition would permanently protect a significant reach of Fish Creek from habitat degradation and would facilitate future enhancement activities. Outside of the Blackfoot, Fish Creek is the most important stronghold for bull trout in the middle Clark Fork region and many of the bull trout found in the Clark Fork are reared in Fish Creek. An intact migratory corridor and rearing area in the main stem is vital to this bull trout population. In addition to the fisheries values, the riparian and upland habitats on the proposed addition provides habitat for a suite of species, including: moose, grizzly bear, wild turkey, little brown myotis, rufous hummingbird and flammulated owls. Also, the connectivity of the Whitehorse Gulch parcel provides an important migratory corridor for elk and mule deer between summer and winter ranges. Providing well-managed public access to these exceptional conservation values will benefit the citizens of Montana.

Five Valleys has partnered with FWP on multiple projects within the Fish Creek drainage to transition these critical parcels from private to public ownership. In 2016, FWP requested Five Valleys' assistance in acquiring the Koch properties in order to protect its conservation values and provide additional public access and opportunities. We appreciate the opportunity to work once again with FWP to protect this special place for people, and fish and wildlife.

Sincerely,

Amber Sherrill
Executive Director



Board of Directors:

Mary Babson • David Banks • Jim Brown • Ken Burd • Jim Cusker • Mary Lynn Eiseman • Julie Fogarty • Mike Foote
Julie Gardner • Denny Iverson • Kathy McAllister • John Rameil • Kristin Tossman • Pam Volkmann • Rick Wishcamper

Comment 71



April 12, 2018

Attn: Sharon Rose
shrose@mt.gov

Re: Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area Draft EA

Dear Sharon

Please accept our comments on the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area Draft EA from the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup.

The Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup is a group of Huson/Ninemile/Alberton residents and others committed to promoting knowledge and stewardship of wildlife and habitats within these communities and surrounding public lands. Details about our organization can be found on our website: <http://www.ninemilewildlife.org/>. Much of our mission area is a Forest Service demographic connectivity area for grizzly bears and all of it is an important connectivity area between the Bitterroot, the Northern Continental Divide, and the Selway/Cabinet Yaak ecosystems. This area provides a biological bridge permitting migration and genetic exchange between these vast islands of security for far-ranging species of wildlife to persist.

The lands of the Fish Creek State Park and Wildlife Management Area are a critical component of the bridge between these ecosystems. We have previously commented on Fish Creek State lands on February 6, 2014, and on November 6, 2015 and we remain interested in the management of this area. Many in our group commonly use this area for a variety of recreational pursuits such as fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing. Some of us have read your EA and have attended the public meeting in Alberton on March 22, 2018.

Appendix B
Public meeting for Proposed Koch Addition to Fish Creek WMA
Alberton Community Center
March 22, 2018

25 members of the public attended.

FWP personnel present: Randy Arnold, Liz Bradley, Ladd Knotek, Caleb Uerling, Tyler Ramaker, Mike Thompson

Question:

Could there be a place to park off the road rather than making people park on the main roadside?

Commenter #:

1. **Ken Arledge.** I support the idea of preserving the creekside and not letting it go all private.
2. **Kit Fischer.** I support.
3. **Harvey Mead.** I oppose because of the way you've managed the woods so far--leafy spurge at Tarkio and we asked them to spray the roadside for the spurge and FWP did not. Have not done a good job managing St. John's Wort where identified. Haven't been doing a good job with the land we've got.
4. **Anonymous A.** Support. I've been envious of this ground for years because it is flat. I like it. Give me a place to park and a flat place to walk and I am good. Also, I am seeing a lot of out of state plates which should be good for the economy.
5. **Pat Sweeney.** Support. I don't see a downside and I encourage FWP to make the purchase.
6. **Anonymous B.** Support. I think this is a good project, consolidating public land and should be good for the economy.
7. **Anonymous C.** Support. I fish with small kids a lot it's hard to fish this with the stream access law alone.
8. **Roman Zylawy,** Mineral County Commissioner. I don't oppose this particular purchase but am concerned about the future purchases. Stipulations come with Pittman-Robertson [Wildlife Restoration Act, 1937]. Nothing wrong with this project on its own--glad for the FWP property tax, but there's so much public land in Mineral County. [Only] 7% private land in Mineral County--granted FWP is paying vacant land taxes, but it's not the same as if the land is being developed. I'm not necessarily nixing this particular piece of land but looking at the big picture, we're opposed to purchasing any more public land. So, Mineral County has to be opposed.

9. **Anonymous D.** Support. Best stream from Flathead to Missoula and should be added.

Name? (spoke earlier). I see in the short run what Roman says, but in the long run with the enhanced fishery and reputation, I think the fishery will generate more money from non-residents in the long run.

10. **Anonymous E.** Support. The map shows that this small area will contribute a lot in blocking up the whole. You get more revenue out of this by protecting it for the whole than by sparing one possible home site.

Name? (spoke earlier). Tourism is the third leading industry in Montana, so tourism is the future.

[Side discussion: Conversation about snowmobiling losses.]

8. **Roman Zylawy** (spoke earlier). Talked about power and this is the last piece crossing the checkerboard to prevent modern day improvements up the drainage. This is the last nail in the coffin for future power. The horse is out of the barn now and this little purchase won't make a lot of difference, but people should be aware. Want people to think about the future big picture.
11. **Hellgate Hunters & Anglers.** *[Also submitted comment #57a, Appendix A].* Support. We support and really appreciate it here and the resource.
12. **Kristie DuBois.** Support. I would support a tourist tax for Mineral County. Hope the PILT payments are restored. I like the flat spots. Appreciate Roman's comments and am sympathetic to the need to support the county.